> ### *SCHOOL TURNAROUND*
> ### CASE STUDY:
> ### WASHINGTON HEIGHTS ELEMENTARY ~ FORT WORTH, TX
> ### MARGARITA GARCIA, PRINCIPAL

- **INTRODUCTION**

The issue of school improvement is one that has challenged education for several decades. The focus of school improvement has ranged from effectiveness, curricular reform, school choice, reconstitution, external takeovers, and now "accountability." The larger question of school leadership within these different reform efforts has been even harder to understand. School Turnaround, with its systematic design, individualized approach to school leadership, and focus on student learning outcomes, offers one way to link the role of the principal to school improvement. This case study is a description of one principal's implementation of the School Turnaround (ST) strategies.

Data for this case study was collected over the course of two years. During those two years data collection included three interviews with the principal (one initial, one end of year, one semi-structured on ST strategies), archival data (emails between the principal and the specialist, conference presentations), one school visit, specialist and faculty interviews, and conference observations. These data were analyzed, independently and collectively, for patterns and unifying themes. In addition, the School Turnaround model provided a framework for both data collection and analysis.

This report on the case study is divided into five sections. The *Background* section is provided as a general context for the work done by this school. The second section, *Strategies*, is further divided into the six School Turnaround strategies used by Washington Heights over the past two years. Section three explores the issue of *Turnaround Leadership* as understood by the

principal, Margarita Garcia. Section four examines the *Partnership* and the nature of the relationship between the principal and the specialist, Gillian Williams. The final section draws some conclusions from the case study and implications for School Turnaround.

- **BACKGROUND**

Washington Heights is a pre-K through 5th grade school with 395 students and 20 teachers. 95 percent of the students are Hispanic and 65 percent are economically disadvantaged. The student attendance rate is 96 percent. Most of the school is underground and if not for the large red and white banner at the entrance and a new, brightly colored playground area, it is easily missed. The school's recent growth has forced the district to install several portable classrooms around the school grounds. Towards the back of the school grounds, a new garden is being developed as part of the science program.

The school is located in North Fort Worth, an area known for high poverty rates, large immigrant population – mostly from Mexico and Central America, unemployment, gang-related activities, and school failure. Despite this reputation, the school is surrounded by small, well-kept homes. Trees and grass are visible from the street and there is a sense of open space. It is relatively quiet and people can be seen walking along the side of the road. Not far from the school there is a commercial strip with its share of restaurants, gas stations, stores, but the school is located in a more residential area.

The school had the same principal for seventeen years, from 1984 to 2001. In that time, the school achieved *recognized* status (as determined by test scores) from 1997 to 2000. In 2001 the school achieved *exemplary* status. At the end of 2001 the principal retired. Another principal was brought in from 2001 to 2003. During the first year the school maintained its status as *recognized*. The following year, for the first time in six years the school slipped to *acceptable*

status. This year also signaled a change in the statewide accountability system. The state abandoned the TAAS exam for the more rigorous Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test[1].

Margarita arrived in 2003. She is approximately five feet, five inches tall. Her long dark hair and golden complexion hint at her Mexican/indigenous heritage. When she speaks, her voice is low and deep. She has a strong, no-nonsense face and her presence can be felt when she approaches – both because of the character that emanates and her determined walk. Her manner is direct and efficient. Hardly ever sitting when in school, she is high energy and in constant motion. Occasionally, you can see flashes of humor that are subtle and unexpected. When she laughs, she means it. While adults are often initially "scared" of her, children approach her without reservation, confident that they will be known and heard. It only takes a little while to understand that this is a leader with a clear purpose.

Margarita describes her first year as one in which she spent time getting to know the staff and leaving things as they were. In terms of achievement they were "doing okay" so it did not occur to her that anything major had to be done. After her first year, the school maintained its *acceptable* status but sustained a significant drop in their scores, "We had that big dip that first year and oh my gosh! We were in trouble!" In looking back at that first year she says of herself, "I didn't know any better."

After receiving the test scores from her first year, Margarita immediately began reaching out to colleagues and district personnel for ideas and help for her school. The person in charge of the district's data told her that a representative from School Turnaround would be making a presentation for the district, and invited her to attend. Margarita describes her thought process as,

---

[1] It is important to note that the change from the TAAS to the TAKS exposed a downward trend in student achievement statewide. In this case the school had been in decline for several years before Margarita arrived.

"when given the opportunity I said, I will take it because it can't get any worse, that's for sure." After attending the information session, Margarita remembers that she "really liked School Turnaround's background. They had worked with other schools before and had seen results. [They] are results-based so I knew it was not something that [they] weren't sure about, they have actually seen results. That's why I knew it was for me."

In the summer of 2004 Margarita attended the first Turnaround conference along with members of her leadership team. Accompanying her were the Assistant Principal and Instructional Specialist. The team "didn't know each other that well" when they attended the conference. According to Margarita, "my AP was new, my Instructional Specialist had been in the classroom so we had that administrator-teacher relationship." Rather than seeing this as obstacle, Margarita saw it as another opportunity to learn and build relationships with her team.

Since their involvement in School Turnaround, the downward trend that the school was experiencing in test scores stopped and began to improve, dramatically in many instances (see Table I).

Table 1. % Passing 2003-2005[2] (All Students)

	3RD			4TH			5TH		
	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006
Reading	79	90	90	58	68	67	51	67	86
Math	70	69	76	55	79	76	43	82	92
Writing	-	-	-	61	95	87	-	-	-
Science	-	-	-	-	-	-	37	47	71

Behind this turnaround effort, is one principal implementing strategies to not only change her school, but to change the lives of the children in her care. The case study explains how she did it.

- **STRATEGIES**

---

[2] Data from TEA website: www.tea.state.tx.us/students.assessment/reporting

School Turnaround is based upon a series of six strategies for organizational improvement. The strategies are: *diagnosis, target-setting, data use, message, resource alignment, and successful classrooms*. These six strategies have been developed over time based on the experiences of "turning around" low-performing schools. Turnaround principals and school teams are trained on the strategies during a summer conference prior to implementation. Subsequent conferences reinforce the design and focus on improving instructional leadership.

The following section details how Margarita understood and implemented the School Turnaround (ST) strategies in her school. In addition, where appropriate, comments from the faculty are included in order to assess the change these strategies had on teachers' work and professional lives. It is important to note that these comments represent individual reflections on the implementation of these strategies, not the implementation itself.

Diagnosis

The first step in Turnaround is to quickly assess school performance. It is important at this stage that teams take an honest and critical look at their performance in concrete terms. This is done by looking at data over time (what is "trending") and identifying elements of the school that "block" performance. Underlying this first strategy is the assumption that children can learn. Rather than focus on students, the diagnosis process allows schools to see structural and interpersonal factors that impede the learning and performance of students. By reframing student performance as an organizational issue, not a student one, the principal can see new solutions to the existing "problem."

Diagnosis was critical to the changes and improvement in Washington Heights. From the downward trend of student scores, it was clear that something was "wrong" but there was no

attempt to identify specifically where they were going wrong. The process of "going through the diagnosis and [sitting] down and actually look[ing] at what brought us to that point helped us to look forward, to know what needs to be addressed before we move." In another instance, Margarita reiterates, "the blinders are off and we took a good hard look at what went wrong and we are going to fix it." Rather than shirk from what can be learned from diagnosing, Margarita saw it as an opportunity for honest and critical reflection on school and to get a sense of how to improve. As one member of the faculty put it, "we started learning where our problem areas were … when you can pinpoint the weak points it's easier to fill those gaps." Another teacher adds, "we had a much more focused look at what we were doing and we had more of the whole picture."

Another aspect of diagnosing that was important was the idea of "trying to work as smart as possible." By knowing where the problems were, teachers are able to "focus, have a purpose … and make it more manageable, more doable." Rather than have teachers, teaching, and programs pulling student in all directions, the diagnosis process brought learning needs into sharp relief and allowed teachers to be more learner-centered and more effective in the classroom.

Target Setting

Out of the detailed diagnosis of school performance, teams begin the process of setting achievement targets for specific grades and/or content areas based on local or state measures. Targets are set on two existing baselines: previous performance and expected performance without an intervention. It is especially important to use the trends identified in the diagnosis to

determine targets as well as to see target setting as a long-term process that begins with measured – and measurable – steps.

If anything, the process of target setting was more important than the diagnosing, "it was more helpful … it made it personal [since] we broke it down by teacher at the first faculty meeting of the year." It is clear that the two are related, but the process of making sense of the data on a class-by-class and student-by-student basis made the data less abstract and more individualized. Teachers came to realize that behind every score is a student who is not learning.

The target setting served two additional purposes: (1) introducing data to teachers and (2) as a source of motivation. Despite appearances, targets were not set randomly. Margarita describes it as "we looked at results from the previous year and looked at what was reasonable … it has to make sense to us." Before the first faculty meeting she met with teachers to go over their individual data, "it had to make sense to them, it was collaborative …I couldn't do this alone." In the process of setting individual targets, teachers got to know their kids at a fundamental level. One teacher says, "we know who are our targeted kids from the beginning, and if we don't know them, she will!" Margarita adds "they know I know!"

Margarita also sees target setting as a source of motivation for teachers, "it helps the teachers who are working so hard, look at August, look how far you've come … encourage them. I know it's tough." The use of target setting as a source of motivation has extended to the students as in the case of one teacher who said that "involving the kids in personal and class targets was their motivation to work harder."

Much like diagnosing, target setting allows for energy to be directed to the students who need it, in the areas they need it. It also creates the framework for data use, resource alignment, and successful classrooms.

Data Use

Once the diagnosis and target setting for the school has been completed, teams move to a deeper and systematic analysis of the data by grade, class, and student. What this entails is having the data *mean* something to schools. In order to achieve the targets, schools must know with certainty what is going on within their "target audience." This detailed process includes, essentially, identifying individual "trends" and "blockers" for students, as well as setting individual targets for those students and their teachers. Equally important is putting the data to work for schools and teachers. Data is seen, therefore, not as a punitive measure but as a tool for improving instruction and for an understanding of personal responsibility for student performance.

Part of the challenge of all the data that schools and teachers have available to them is making sense of it in meaningful and practical ways. One teacher shares her experience learning to understand the data, "Teachers use of data? Now that I have it, what do I do with it … okay, I can use it!" For Margarita, data use means "break[ing] it down into the strands to plan instruction, after school tutoring, any instruction you are planning." Using data as a source of information, not just on student learning, but on teacher teaching is key to School Turnaround and a critical component of school improvement.

Margarita describes the process of data use as "empowering teachers. Teaching them how to read it, how to disaggregate it, how to set up tutoring groups using the data, making them more proficient with the data." For teachers, "the more comfortable [we] get with the data, the more [we're] able to say I can do this because I know this!" Data does not become an end in itself, but rather one of many tools at teachers' disposal to improve their teaching.

Two challenges arose from the process of using data. The first was in creating the database in ways that made sense to the school, "setting it up was kind of difficult and setting up the formula." Especially since district support was very "generic" and the database they received from the district did not allow them to get to the level of specificity they wanted. Here the specialist was vital in understanding what Margarita wanted and being able to translate that into an appropriate data tool for them. A second challenge was the level of involvement of the teachers. Initially Margarita wanted teachers involved in all the data sorting, but she found that that it was very time-consuming, "before I thought that it was valuable to have teachers do it themselves, but it's overwhelming and a lot of work. I think it's valuable for them to know, but if we do it for them it's just as valuable when you hand it to them so they can focus on other things … [the teacher part] is to that you are going to use it to plan instruction." In conversation with teachers at the school, it was clear that they were perfectly comfortable speaking about the school's data, not just their own, "we made improvements in every single category" and "we progressed in all our target areas." They also spoke about how they used the data to "guide [our] lesson plans" and "the data drove [our] teaching."

Message

A principal's message encompasses both a new identity for the school and a unifying theme for the work to come. There are two important underlying elements of the message: will it be remembered and how it will be communicated. Principals must therefore keep it simple, straightforward, and honest. The "message" must also help to create a sense of urgency among the school community. Lastly, principals must be conscious of how their behavior - in terms of language, actions, and priorities – communicates the message.

When asked about her message, Create success – no excuses, Margarita laughs, "I was thinking why do we need to spend so much time on this? I really didn't think it was going to have a lot of value, but we'll go through it." After kicking off the school year with a dramatic activity designed to demonstrate how excuses were not going to be acceptable anymore, Margarita reflects, "it was a defining moment. It's defined our school and it's been something we come back to frequently and take part in … it's defined us in the district, we are the *no excuses* school."

As a unifying theme it has created powerful results. Margarita has seen that "teachers will catch themselves, oh that's an excuse! In essence … what do I need to do to reach this kid." Teachers agree on a variety of levels. For one teacher, "the more she says it the more it's grown on me … I'm always going to take it with me." Another responds, "our slogan, 'Create Success-No Excuses,' means look at yourself first and see what you need to change to make the kids successful." Still another adds, "it's for the students. She [Margarita] says don't do it because of me, do it for the students, because you want to make the difference in a kid's life." Finally, one teacher says "I remember everything she says."

The message has also been successful in developing a sense of urgency among the teachers. Margarita constantly speaks of her own sense of urgency, "we can't afford to waste time," and how the school without significant change is "letting those kids down" and "the kids are paying the price and I don't think that's very fair." In talking about this renewed sense of urgency one teacher observes, "she took care of that sense of complacency!" Another shares "a lot of time is not wasted anymore. [We've] learned that [we] can't just sit around and talk … even at lunch all the conversations are about what it needs to be: I know I've got to do this to get

them here, what do I need to do to get them there." Lastly, another teacher says, "that motto, she really means it!"

Resource Alignment

Another important strategy in School Turnaround is identifying available resources and focusing them on areas crucial to achieving the targets. In order to do this available resources may need to be shifted, refocused, and in some instances eliminated(as in the case of existing programs that do not directly impact student learning). Resources also include personnel that can be re-assigned or re-programmed to support classroom instruction. Finally, this new "alignment" of resources will give a clear indication where additional resources are necessary and must be sought through either grant writing or resource swapping within the district.

Margarita is firm in her belief that "it's not a program, it's the teachers." In thinking about aligning her resources to focus on the targets, she was able to "raise our awareness of the big picture of what we were using … we had so many resources that we weren't harnessing or using effectively." She describes her frustration early on, "there were tons and tons of programs and materials, more than we could ever, ever need … we are not getting anymore programs, I'm sorry but that's not a choice. We are going to focus on reading. Let's buy books. Our library was pitiful." She also gives the example of the computer lab, "I started going through there when they were going in and they were just dumping the kids in there. We have some pretty good programs in reading and math, but [the students] didn't know what they were doing and [the teachers] were not monitoring it." As a result Margarita began limiting the time in the computer lab and reallocating that time to reading instruction, "no computer lab unless you can justify to me how

you are going to monitor and how it's going to benefit the kids. That was another realignment and that freed up another 45 minutes a day."

Resources, however, include more than programs and materials. In Margarita's eyes the greatest resource in the school are the teachers. Scheduling and reassignment of personnel was an early obstacle. Everyone, from the PE teacher to the art and music teachers to the school nurse, was trained in guided reading and was assigned to classrooms for small group support. Because of the size of the school and traditional scheduling, many of these teachers "were wasting their time." Rather than continue to waste time and teachers, the whole school's schedule was realigned to maximize "eyeball to eyeball instruction" throughout. Margarita is the first to admit that "there were some glitches and some were not as strong as we would have liked, some didn't work out, but it helped us get those resources into the classes." Through the work with School Turnaround, Margarita readily admits that "[they are] teaching us what is useful and what is not. What is not, get rid of it and get it out of your way." As a result, the school has incorporated block scheduling for reading and math. This past year they also implemented a whole day schedule for each content area.

From the teachers' perspectives, they realized the necessity of using their resources more effectively, "if it is something that is going to work for the kids we move to that. If this works for our kids and makes them stronger, then we are going to do it." Another teacher adds, "she will put you where your strength is. It's not about personal relationships; she's going to place you where your strength is." For many teachers having "a lot of systems in place" helped them to work smarter in their classrooms and to look beyond them for help.

Successful Classrooms

School Turnaround is dependent upon strong instruction in classrooms. This entails that principals and leadership teams be present in classes and be prepared to offer help in supportive and systematic ways. By definition then, this includes facilitating discussions with teachers about learning and classroom environment, as well as developing systems for classroom visits, observations, immediate feedback, and recognition of teacher success.

When discussing the development of successful classrooms, Margarita starts by thinking back on the day they got their test scores back in her first year, "I made the decision right then and there, I'm going to focus on instruction, to heck with the [district] deadline." After the first summer conference, Margarita and the team returned with "different eyes" and determined to see what was going on in the classrooms. They began by visiting classrooms, "[during the summer] we had talked about what we *should* see and we took a kind of inventory … we knew what we needed to see. One class at each grade level and we came back and we were like 'Oh my God!'" With these new set of eyes the team realized how much was *not* going on in classrooms. This also helped them see the need for aligning their resources as discussed above.

The next step in creating successful classrooms, and perhaps the most difficult one, was "how do we raise the level of awareness of our teachers, so that they want to do it and don't see it as something threatening." For Washington Heights this included, realigning resources, ongoing classroom visits, constant teacher feedback, focused professional development, development of a model classroom, and a hands-on approach to teaching.

Teachers most often mentioned Margarita's high expectations and standards balanced by consistent support structures. They also felt that Margarita had fairly assessed their strengths and weaknesses and provided the necessary guidance to improve their teaching. One teacher

commented that, "I got a lot of support. She said this is how I think we can help you and it was implemented. When she says something is going to get done, it gets done." Another teacher mentioned, that "she's in my room a lot and I'm not defensive because she's in there to help and to help the kids."

Several teachers also mentioned that Margarita's high expectations and belief that "they can do it," was a source of motivation for them, personally and professionally. Their comments demonstrate a deep commitment to their own growth, "she's teaching you how to be a better teacher." Another teacher comments, "you do your best to be the best." When speaking about the professional development they receive, one teacher says, "the more we learn, the more we want to make it successful."

The successful classroom for Margarita is not just creating an optimal learning environment for students, but also creating one for teachers to develop their skills. When speaking about the teacher who agreed to become the "model classroom," Margarita says, "[the classroom environment] should connect to teacher's goals, instructional goals, but also where she wants to go next … ever since we have implemented it, she's grown so much."

The focus on instruction also comes from a very personal level for Margarita. Teachers comment on how "connected she is to her own teaching" and her willingness to "get in there with them" in the classroom, in after school, during writing "boot camp," and Saturday sessions. One teacher remembers, "she did her own tutoring [of target students] for the last three months for an hour a day. It helped me, it helped our scores." This personal commitment to student learning and teacher development has made a tremendous impact on classroom environments and practices, as well as in student performance.

- **TURNAROUND LEADERSHIP**

While focusing on implementation, ST also helps principals identify – and develop - certain "sparkplug characteristics" that are necessary for successful turnaround. These sparkplug characteristics are:

- *Energy*: Stamina, enthusiasm/optimism, sense of humor
- *Action Push*: Solution focused, sense of urgency, see opportunity
- *Results Focus*: Need for achievement, envision end state, welcome scorecard
- *Personal Responsibility*: Admit mistakes, individual performance clarity, take responsibility
- *Use of Teams*: Recognize weaknesses, share credit, seek collaboration
- *Core Education Know-How*: Leader role, effective classrooms, diagnosis

Together the sparkplug characteristics outline the expectations for principals during their implementation of the design.

As important then, is the relationship between the turnaround success and leadership. In the words of one teacher, "Turnaround is a big part of the success, but having the right person at the top is a big part, too." How Margarita sees her leadership, as well as her strengths and weaknesses, is as important as the School Turnaround (ST) process itself.

When Margarita describes her own leadership she focuses mostly on instructional issues, "if the staff doesn't respect you as an instructional leader they are not going to follow you." She also identifies ways in which her leadership has changed through her involvement, particularly around data use, "the way that I look at data and the way that I know to use it." Is clear from the previous discussion on implementation, however, that her leadership encompasses much more. As a leader, the perceptions of her "followers" are also a crucial dimension of her leadership. This section explores Margarita's leadership from her own perspective and that of the staff. In analyzing transcripts from all the interviews and observations of her interactions with other ST principals themes such as *focus, seeking help, advocacy*, *commitment*, *modeling*, and *innovation* emerge. While the relationship to the sparkplug characteristics and guidelines is not explicitly

discussed, clear parallels can be seen between them and the themes that emerged from an analysis of the data.

Focus

Margarita thinks that her leadership has been most shaped by the focus that ST has provided and maintained throughout. In looking back at her first year, she remembers that she "was into the management of it because I was overwhelmed by it all. I would drop everything that I was doing and do it [district request], even if I didn't get into classrooms that day." Pulled by district demands and the traditions of the school, Margarita allowed her leadership to focus on administration. Even in the early implementation stages Margarita recalls, "we had our systems in place but we got pulled in many different directions so a lot of the systems went by the wayside. We didn't have the checkpoints [yet] to keep ourselves on track."

In speaking of how her leadership has changed she says, "[it's] helped me to move from the perspective of being a classroom teacher to be a true leader that has to look at *everything*, has to look across the grade levels, across the different subjects areas." When asked about the tension on the more global perspective of school leadership and the need to stay focused she describes it as a careful balance, "you can't generalize, everybody has to be specific as well. But not to be so focused, I guess, on certain areas. You have to balance it out, I have to balance it out."

In the initial interview, Margarita admits that her major challenge was going to be to "stick to it" and not be distracted by other non-instructionally related issues. She recognized that ST would provide a way to stay on track and be accountable, as well as to help her recognize that "if what [I'm] doing is not working, let's change it." Through the implementation she readily states that she has learned "that what doesn't get monitored, doesn't get done. So now I've

realized that importance of sticking with it. And the teachers know that I do." As a result she is clearly focused on student learning, teaching, and reaching their targets.

When teachers were asked about how Margarita's leadership has changed many talk about her increased use of data, presence in their classrooms, and focus on learning. One teacher describes Margarita as being "more confident … knows where she wants to go." Interestingly, one teacher disagreed saying that "in a personal sense, I don't think that she's changed that much, but people's views have changed of her …she's been here for one purpose since the beginning." It could be that her increased comfort with data and the clear articulation of her message have helped people see her leadership in a new way.

Seeking Help

From the start, Margarita has been unabashed in asking for help for her school. This is a key element of turnaround leadership for her, "you've got to be able to admit that you need help and if you aren't able to get past that then your whole heart isn't in it and nothing is going to work, no matter what." She understands, at a fundamental level, that the only way to improve her leadership – and her school – is "to be open, of course, to suggestions and you have to approach it with an open mind and be willing to take a long, hard look at yourself, what you're doing, what's working, what's not working." Additionally, she describes herself as "the kind of person, that if I know someone successful, I'll call them up and say can I come over." Even for someone as reflective and open as Margarita, the process is not an easy one, "it was an uncomfortable situation … looking at your weak areas is not a comfortable situation." Yet, by focusing on the needs of her students and teachers she is able to do the needed work to improve her leadership.

Recently, this help-seeking has extended to developing teacher leadership, "it's helped me to see is that I shouldn't have to do it all and I should be building leaders in the building so that we can all work together, we can all carry the load." This increased emphasis on "shifting responsibility to the teachers," however, has increased awareness of her "control issues" and has added a new dimension to her work by "forc[ing] me to [set] up quality delegation … you want them to do a good job, then you're going to have to set parameters before you start and do the work at the forefront." During the implementation of the ST design, she has resisted the urge to do it all herself, which she points out can't be done, and has learned to rely on others.

Whether planned or not, this has developed a sense of community and professionalism among teachers. One teacher reflects, "there's a more professional sense to the teachers. [We've] progressed to the level where it's not just about being a teacher any more … I feel like [we're] more professional." Another teacher adds "[she] makes us feel more comfortable by asking our opinions." Still another teaches says that "[she's] always asking, what do *we* need to do to make this work." It is clear to the teachers that "she relies on other people for helping" and they have responded by their high level of commitment and the quality of their work.

Advocacy

At no time does Margarita use the word advocate or frame her leadership as a form of advocacy. Yet at the heart of all she does are the children in the community, children she often calls "my babies." This is embedded in her sense of fairness (or justice), responsibility, and urgency. She insists, consistently, that "kids are paying the price" for schools that are not doing their jobs. And she is impatient with those who are slow to see the injustice, "the teachers

understand that we are changing. Either you are coming or you are staying behind, but get out of the way because we are moving on."

Related to this, she has a profound belief in the potential of all children and that all children can learn. This is more than political correctness or a trendy slogan, for her it is a way of life, "I really believe in it or else I wouldn't be here. And I'm here because of my kids." When thinking about her leadership she says "when the day comes that I don't really know the kids, it's time for me to move on." Her work and energy are grounded in the lives of children.

This is not lost on the teachers, "her heart is to make kids successful and [she is] willing to do whatever it takes." They are able to recognize and clearly articulate her purpose. One teacher remembers, "in [our] meetings it's always, 'We're doing this for the children, the children come first, and I'm not here to look out for anybody but the children,' *always*." Other teachers agree, "she's focused on getting the kids where they need to be" and "bottom line: she's here for the kids." The passion with which Margarita speaks about children is, in large part, why teachers have been so successful in hearing her "message."

Commitment

One of the key characteristics of turnaround leadership for Margarita is being committed to the work of the school, "you've got to be a workaholic, willing to put in the time." This commitment has to extend to all aspects of the school: students, teachers, classrooms. In explaining this she makes it clear, "I know the kids really well … I know that my teachers see me not only as a leader but as somebody that will stand with them in the trenches."

This requires many more hours than the normal school day. She often works ten-hour days, arriving before everyone and leaving last. The weekends find her at school (in addition to

the regular Saturday activities), when she tries to catch up on much of the administrative work that does not get done during the week. The weekend also finds her family at the school, either helping with tutoring or working on some of the larger school projects. In this way she is able to maintain a balance between work and home. She jokes that her family is at school almost as much as she is. Rather than seeing her commitment to the school and her family as an either-or issue, she has reframed it as a both-and situation in which the two are inter-related and equally valued.

Teachers talk, especially, about Margarita's commitment to them and their growth. The time spent in classrooms is a clear example of this commitment. Her style is described as being "very hands-on." Stories of her tutoring, modeling lessons, providing resources, and being accessible abound among the staff. Others offer examples of how her commitment means, "we can't rest on our laurels." One teacher explains further, "she has set the goals and set the standard. And yet [we] know that she's going to do whatever it takes to get [us] to that point." And teachers have responded in kind, with high levels of commitment to the school and to her personally. One telling comment made was, "people will follow her right to the top."

Modeling

When asked about her leadership style, Margarita promptly responds, "I lead by example." She further defines that by saying, "I always tell my teachers that I wouldn't ask them to do something that I wouldn't do myself." Not only does she model a high level of commitment, but also demonstrates her awareness of the day-to-day realities of teaching and the pressure that teachers feel, "I know it's tough." In a similar respect, she models as a way to both demonstrate her competence (something teachers are generally wary of) and to reassure teachers,

"you've got to model … does she really know her stuff? You've got to be willing to put yourself out there in front of your teachers." The thought being that unless she is responsive to teachers' needs, then she can't expect them to be responsive to student needs. It also allows her to stay connected to classroom life. Therefore, she models the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that she wants the teachers to refine.

Here again, teachers have taken note, "she's right there with you, she works beside you, right in the trenches … [she] works hard, if not harder." Teachers have been particularly sensitive to how she models high expectations, "her role is seeing what can be done and setting a high standard for us and then pushing us towards that goal" while finding ways to support them (as in the discussion on successful classrooms). Teachers recognize that Margarita works hard and that "she wants 100% of those around her." In a significant example, one teacher relates, "she let us know from day one what the expectation is, it can be done and you are good enough to do this." Another teacher adds, "if she thinks you can do it, you can." This combination of high expectations, belief in teachers, and support provides a powerful model for classroom planning and interactions.

Innovation

Though never speaking of it as a direct outcome of her leadership, the school has implemented several innovations over the past two years. In aligning resources, one of the first things she did was to organize the schedules into blocks, in which the first block of the day was devoted, school-wide, to literacy. When explaining this she says, "my first year [everyone turned in their own schedule] because that's the way it had always been. But that was really tough on me. If I wanted to see reading I'd have to pull out [all] the schedules." With the new schedule,

"when I do my classroom observations and I want to see reading then I know I need to get up there in those first ninety minutes." The second block is focused on math. More importantly "nothing else is going on at that time, no pullouts … just uninterrupted instruction."

Another scheduling innovation was carving out common planning time for teachers in the same grade. By realigning resources so that "one third grade class was in the computer lab, one in the library, one in PE so they had common planning time. That gave them team planning time during the day so they wouldn't have to meet after school." This use of time also helped to improve instruction since the teachers were planning collaboratively and building on each others' strengths. Margarita quickly adds that the idea and support for these changes in scheduling were a direct result of ST. The specialist was instrumental in sitting with Margarita to iron out all the scheduling issues, "I said it's not going to work, getting all these times aligned to get them common planning time … she helped me develop the schedule." And according to Margarita, it was "one of the cornerstones of our success."

Recently, the upper grades were implementing a whole-day content schedule, in which one day was devoted each to reading, math, writing, etc. As part of the June Assessment and Learning Conference, principals were given the book *Struggling Readers* (Allington, 2005). Allington describes that struggling learners need time and depth in order to improve. Taking that to heart, Margarita began working on developing a whole-day plan. The plan began less than two months later in August 2005.

Other innovations have been in the school and classroom libraries. When Margarita arrived the library was in a "pitiful" condition. What was once a large open room had been reduced to half by the addition of a movable partition. This allowed the art teacher to have space for storing materials and teaching. It also meant that the library space was halved – with many of

the books randomly divided among classrooms – and in many respects, abandoned (especially since entire classes could no longer fit). The number of bilingual books in particular was "embarrassing" given the high number of English Language Learners. Along with the assistant principal, instructional specialist, and some teachers, the entire library was restocked and "leveled" for readability to reinforce the reading program being used school-wide. Classroom libraries were also "leveled" making the system throughout the school and easily accessible to students wherever they go.

In addition, the library room was expanded (the art teacher received other space) and a reward system was created to motivate students to read more. At the center of the library is a large "tree" whose branches reach out along the ceiling to the far walls of the room. Along these branches, little "monkeys" (with students' names) hang at intervals that indicate students' reading levels and numbers of books read. In the words of one teacher, "kids are always talking about those monkeys." The library has become a vibrant focal point of the school.

Other important innovations were the development of a community bank (with 5th grade students serving as bank tellers) in which students open and maintain a savings account. When the bank is open, long lines can be seen down the hall as classes line up to make their deposits. This is done through a partnership with a local bank. In a recent development, students who leave or graduate from the school are able to "take" their accounts to the middle school or the bank itself.

The recent construction of the playground was another project that combined community action, grant writing, and other forms of fund-raising. The playground is a symbol of the school's commitment to the community and the community's commitment to the school. Lastly, a recent grant was received for the development of a school garden. The garden both reinforces the

science curriculum and addresses mental health concerns by giving students the opportunity to create space for quiet thought. Students are involved in identifying plants that would attract butterflies and other birds/insects to make the garden into their retreat.

Other Leadership Attributes

In the interviews, teachers identified other important attributes of Margarita's leadership. Among these was her willingness to take more risks, "last year she was holding back, this year it's been growing." Teachers often used the terms supportive, consistent, and being a good listener. Another interesting characteristic was "flexible" in that "not every teacher is the same and she respects that about teachers … if it's working and [you] are getting results, she'll let you be." Lastly, teachers mentioned Margarita's knowledge of and commitment to the community.

> *I never knew how much a principal can make such a difference in the environment, climate, attitudes. It's unbelievable. I had no idea that a principal could make such an impact. It's unbelievable the difference the way people talk about their job and talk about their students … it's community-wide.*

By working "very closely with families," teachers have noticed that "the parents trust the school and rely on the school" more than ever before. By working alongside Margarita, teacher and parents are determined to "build up the school and the community."

In looking at the relationship between the ST sparkplug characteristics and the different perspectives on Margarita's leadership, it is easy to see where there is a clear connection. Margarita's energy, bias toward action, results focus, personal responsibility, desire to build capacity, and know-how are easily recognizable. Similarly, through her involvement with ST she has become more strategic, more of an interventionist, and – without a doubt – more innovative. Margarita has developed and integrated these characteristics into her sense of who she is and

expanded her leadership to the extent that students and teachers have experienced tremendous success.

- **THE *PARTNERSHIP***

Effective School Turnaround depends, in large part, to the partnership between the participating principal and the Turnaround Specialist. This relationship is complex and unique, depending on the personal interactions and professional strengths of each. Within the turnaround model, this relationship is the foundation for the work of improving schools. The quality of the relationship is critical to turnaround success.

School Turnaround describes the work of the specialist as assisting, supporting, and challenging, in whatever form. The key elements of the relationship therefore are:

- *Personal*: honest, respectful, invested
- *Accessible*: convenient, persistent, flexible
- *Useful*: relevant, up-to-date, networked

To develop the relationship with principals, Specialists provide a minimum of six site visits with reports after each that reflect back and drive forward, weekly contact via phone or email, and provide access to a variety of tools and resources. Turnaround also provides guidelines for appropriate interaction between the principal and Specialist (see Table 2).

Unlike other mentoring relationships, the Specialist does not play an active or recognizable role in the school. On the contrary, Specialists – and their role - are usually only known to the principal and leadership team. For Turnaround, the principal is ultimately responsible for the success of their school. By staying under the radar screen the integrity of the principal's leadership is maintained in the school community. This focus means that Specialists focus on the development of the capacity of principals to lead change.

Specialists are selected based on their direct experience turning around a low-performing school or schools. This proven track record is key to Specialist selection. In fact, some Specialists continue leading their schools as they provide support and critical feedback for participating principals. Specialists support up to six schools at a time. In this case the Specialist works fulltime with School Turnaround.

Table 2. Role of the Specialist

Specialists *Will* …	Specialists *Will Not* …
• Work with principal and leadership team • Observe principal interaction with staff • Walk through classrooms with principal • Develop new ideas • Analyze data • Offer new strategies and knowledge • Help to work through "tough stuff" • Challenge thinking, speak plainly and bluntly and step back when needed • Recognize that the principal makes all the decisions	• Discuss school or principal with the district • Visit school and spend the day with someone other than the principal

It is important to know Margarita's perspective on her Specialist relationship and how it contributed to her school's success. When asked about the Specialist, Margarita focused on concrete issues, such as the Specialist's expertise, knowledge of her school, kinds of support offered, responsiveness, etc. While true, they point to larger issues of the Specialist *adding value* to the improvement effort and creating opportunities for *connection* at multiple levels. These seem to be *necessary* elements of the relationship (and part of the ST model), but in and of themselves, not *sufficient* for a successful partnership. It appears that in addition to these there are some "non-quantifiable" elements of the relationship that will also be discussed.

Adding Value

It is clear from Margarita and her style that the most important element of *any*

professional relationship is what she can learn from it, what she can get out of it for her school.

Given her focus, she would not be part of anything that would not directly apply to her school or

help attain her goals. The relationship with the Specialist must, therefore, add value. In this case

the Specialist added value in a number of ways. The first was through expertise in the ST

strategies, the second in content knowledge, third is understanding of low-performing schools,

and, finally, in access to new resources or other funding sources.

Turnaround Strategies. Part of the challenge of the Specialist role is supporting the

principal through implementation of the six Turnaround strategies, in the short and long term.

Especially important is uses of data and "knowledge of the database" (this has been discussed at

length in the section on this strategy). In-depth knowledge includes not just the how-to, but also

being able to address problems as they arise. Margarita comments how the Specialist would, "go

over the data and identify the kids and what teachers we need to be working on." As the

Specialist puts it, "it's all just about figuring out what your kids specifically need." It was not

just knowledge of the Strategies themselves, but also how the Specialist was able to "back it up

with research." Knowledge was, therefore, both practical and theoretical.

The other part of the challenge is not falling into the trap of "doing" the implementation

for the principal. While speaking about their work with the Specialist, Margarita and her

leadership team also highlighted the nature of their relationship. They describe that relationship

as one in which they were "working together for the kids to succeed," how the Specialist "shared

with us," and finally how the Specialist "helped us to get where we are at." In another instance,

Margarita remembers, "she jumped in with the schedule. She didn't just tell me here's an idea,

go figure it out. We sat side by side and figured it out." Agreeing, the Specialist frames it as

"what areas do *you* really want to target." Rather than to rely on the Specialist to do the work for them, they used the Specialist as a resource.

Content knowledge. Another way in which the Specialist contributed to Margarita's development was through her knowledge of content, particularly in literacy. Margarita recalls, "we can look at a reading objective, like main idea and she can come up with specific strategies, they can start doing this, they can start doing this, specific." She describes the knowledge as consistent and reliable. In addition, to knowledge about content and strategies, Margarita built on the Specialist's knowledge of "structures in the classroom" that helped them to focus on improving teaching.

Knowledge of Schools. Throughout the Turnaround process, Margarita repeatedly mentioned that the Specialist knew her school, knew the teachers (more on this in the following section). She also observed, however, that it was the Specialist's leadership experience in a similar school (in terms of demographics and challenges) and her other experiences as a Turnaround Specialist that made her realize that "she knows her stuff, she *really* knows her stuff." Related to this, and equally important, was by adding her "manpower" to the school. Margarita calls it a "hands-on approach." The Specialist describes that "grunt work is not below me either!" Finally, for Margarita, the Specialist "model[s] turnaround leadership … And she leads by example. So from that, it's like with the teachers I guess, once they see that you know your stuff and you really relate to them and really care about what they're doing, they'll follow you anywhere."

Resources/Networks. The final way of "adding value" is one that is indirect, yet potentially important. Interestingly enough, it is also one that is never mentioned by Margarita, the leadership team or the Specialist. In e-mail communication between Margarita and the

Specialist there is on-going discussion of introducing Margarita to other Turnaround principals, prospective Turnaround principals, interested funders, and corporate sponsors. These introductions seemed to work in two ways. The first was to give Margarita access to these professional networks and resources as a way to further develop her leadership. In discussing her school with other successful principals, or even with those new to Turnaround, Margarita can articulate her role in new and different ways. The second was to offer her opportunities to advocate for her school in terms of both money and materials. In one instance she begins to lobby for discounted books for the school library. An added benefit for School Turnaround was to have Margarita as an example of successful implementation.

Connection

Apart from technical knowledge (such as that discussed above) the relationship between principal and Specialist also relies on the opportunity to connect as professionals. This includes much of the "personal" and "accessible" elements outlined earlier. It also includes knowledge of the school community, responsiveness/availability, and several kinds of support.

Knowledge of School Community. Similarly, part of the "connection" necessitates that the Specialist get to know the school, including teachers, students, and community. Margarita states it bluntly, "to me the bottom line is she knows my teachers, she knows my kids and she has a stake in it as well." This built trust and helped to overcome Margarita's initial wariness and skepticism, "You're coming now, but you're probably going to stop coming later on, kind of that skepticism still because that happened so often. But she didn't, she was always there on the cell phone. We e-mailed back and forth, send me your benchmark results and can you email them to me, send me your latest progress charts on your 5th graders and see how they are doing." This

signaled for Margarita not just an external support system, but also someone who cared about her kids almost as much as she did.

Responsiveness/Responsibility. The notion of responsiveness is one that is embedded in the model itself. Specialists must be available to principals and must respond quickly. This is certainly an important aspect of responsiveness, but it is only one. The other is the nature of the response. In the communications between Margarita and her Specialist, not only is the response "immediate" but it also very focused. On several occasions the Specialist tells Margarita "let me know how I can help" or "if there are particular things you want feedback on, let me know" or "what are the areas that you are seeing need immediate attention." The responsiveness, however, also works in the other direction, meaning that Margarita also had to respond to the Specialist in a timely manner. These exchanges highlight how the Specialist focused her responses to meet Margarita's needs (as opposed to sharing information that would be irrelevant).

The other related issue is "responsibility." In this context it means that *in response* to each others' roles, and needs, both Margarita and the Specialist became responsible to each other. Here, again, the emails are particularly useful in seeing how both Margarita and the Specialist would request and give information. The Specialist, most often, requesting updated test data ("Keep me posted when you get more scores") or other information ("I've got your schedule blocked out but am missing a couple pieces of information). Margarita requesting assistance ("What do you think? Give me some feedback") or documentation ("Can you send me the templates for the item analysis?"). Again, these interactions demonstrate how both Margarita and the Specialist shared the responsibility of planning for school improvement (although the responsibility for implementation remained Margarita's).

Support. Support, for Margarita, consists of many things. Three important ones mentioned so far are general expertise, knowledge of her school, and responsiveness. But these alone are not enough. Support also takes the form of personal/professional and personal. The distinction being between "personal" support in terms of work-related issues and the one-on-one nature of the model, as well as broader issues of well-being.

For Margarita, "the biggest difference in School Turnaround … is the hands-on approach and the personalization." This is related to the earlier comments on how the Specialist knows the school community. There are also instances in which Margarita seeks reassurance from the Specialist, "It just seems that there is always something left to do. We've had some bumps in the road … there have been some tense moments." The Specialist responds adding support, "Glad things are off to such a good start … you do have awesome teachers which means everything will come into line." Another example when Margarita reaches out, "They had a print-out of schools that were in need of dire assistance and guess who was at the top of the list? That's right, me! You know how that made me feel?" In response the Specialist writes, "I have every confidence in the world that your school will not only see gains in achievement – but that it will see great gains." There are many such instances when Margarita seeks advice or support from the Specialist, not simply in terms of organizational or instruction issues, but in terms of her leadership and leadership decisions.

On the other hand, the Specialist also played an important role for Margarita: that of reminding her to take care of herself. In response to an email sent at eight in the evening, the Specialist reacts "What are you doing STILL [emphasis in original] working? STOP and GO. RELAX!!" Other similar emails, "I hope you didn't work all weekend," suggest that the

Specialist was aware of Margarita's work habits and personal needs. Principals so often work in isolation, they often need others – in this case the Specialist – to help care for their well-being.

The "Non-Quantifiable"

There are some final elements of the principal-Specialist relationship that, while difficult to quantify, are important nonetheless. The elements of trust and respect are important to any relationship. And as difficult as they are to identify and measure, they are difficult to develop. Margarita talks about "coming full circle." She says, "we kid around a lot now, but not at first. So it evolved into one of trust and I know that she really cares about us. It's come full circle." In terms of respect she states, "there's always a respect there because she knows what she's doing." That Margarita should come to rely on the Specialist for guidance and support is a testament to the level of trust and respect that has developed between them.

From the e-mail communication between Margarita and the Specialist it is clear that humor was a large and important part of their relationship. There are several ongoing jokes that have evolved into a language of their own (i.e the "batmobile"). It also demonstrates how comfortable their relationship has become over time. This has also forged a strong bond that has probably helped them to work through any problems or tensions that are bound to arise between them.

A final interesting – and difficult to define - element of their relationship is the reciprocal nature of it. In observing their interaction and from the interviews and emails, it is clear that both Margarita and the Specialist "got" something out of the relationship. Both Margarita and the Specialist are intelligent and enterprising professionals, always on the lookout for ways to

improve their practice, asking new – and better- questions. It could be that this combined curiosity and willingness to learn from each other served as the basis for their relationship.

- **Discussion & Implications**

When asked if she could have done any of these strategies without School Turnaround, Margarita is quiet. "Maybe," she says, "maybe we would have gotten around to it, but not to the level of specificity or quality that we got from School Turnaround. It would have taken us longer." That is, perhaps, the easy answer. The hard answer is that, no, they would not have been able to do it. She describes her involvement as being part of a *process* not a program. Although focused on student outcomes, the process orientation of the design may account for Margarita's belief that "maybe" they could have done it on their own.

Margarita recognizes, however, that School Turnaround provides both a level of support and a level of responsibility, that she herself could not provide in her first year, "What happened [that] year is that we started out really strong. We had our systems in place but we got pulled in many different directions so a lot of the systems went by the wayside. We didn't have checkpoints to keep ourselves on track … What School Turnaround [did] is keep me on track and accountable."

In addition she credits much of the improvement in her leadership and in the school to the Turnaround Specialist. The quality of the relationship that developed between Margarita and the Specialist has been instrumental in Washington Heights' success. Everything from the trust that developed, the depth of the Specialist's knowledge, hands-on approach, willingness to do whatever it takes, to the personal knowledge of the school and teachers all worked together to bring Margarita and the school to "another level."

These issues highlight some of the challenges for School Turnaround (ST) as an organization. Because the design focuses almost exclusively on the principal, many in the school community do not know about School Turnaround or the role of the Specialist. While this is a real strength in that ST believes that the principal should be seen as the "change agent" in the school, it provides an obstacle for name recognition and their own level of "branding" in education. Another challenge lies in the tension between process and outcome. ST makes it very clear that the focus is on student outcomes. However, the fact that the strategies used by ST principals could conceivably be happening in schools already (the fact that they are not is a different question), raises a dilemma in that how does the design distinguish itself from others.

Additionally, much of the success of the strategies and design rests on the work and relationship between Specialists and principals. More needs to be known about the nature of that relationship and how to support new and current Specialists. Other case studies should be conducted in order to confirm – or disconfirm – some of the findings from this case study. A cross-case analysis of several schools would also shed more light on implementation *and* the principal-Specialist relationship.

Another remaining –and interesting- question is in regards to the leadership guidelines emphasized in the model. These leadership characteristics are clearly necessary for successful turnaround, but are they sufficient. In other words can *any* principal who is sincere and motivated *be* a Turnaround principal? If not, this does not bode well for hundreds of schools across the country. If so, then how can the model help "good" principals become "great" or, perhaps more challenging, "mediocre" principals to "great." More needs to be explored about what individual principals bring to implementation that paves the way for successful turnaround.

Finally, this case study focused on how Margarita implemented the six strategies and how they worked in her school. Another interesting question, not addressed here, would be to ascertain what aspects of the strategies may not have been helpful and how the design can be improved. As the research and evaluation phases continue to develop, much can be done to explore and explain these issues.

This case study has taken a close look at how one principal implemented School Turnaround. In the process of listening to teachers and questioning Margarita, it is possible to see how, in the best case, a strong leader takes a well-designed model and "runs with it." Margarita's commitment to her school, teachers, students, and community are one vital element of her success. Equally important, is her commitment to her own leadership and learning. And in some cases where principals focus on one to the detriment of the other, Margarita demonstrates how a careful balance can lead to student success and consistent school improvement. Her message to "Create Success – No Excuses" is one that needs to be heard by educators, researchers, and policy makers alike.